CBS 'Assassins' Series Examines King Slaying

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By JAY SHARBUTT

NEW YORK (AP) — CBS News offers tonight a one-hour TV study of the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whether James Earl Ray did it, and if so, whether he acted alone or as part of a conspiracy.

Ray pleaded guilty in a Tennessee court in 1969 to King's slaying in Memphis, but renounced that plea, to no avail.. He later failed in a federal court bid to withdraw his plea and go on trial, but a new effort by him now is pending before a federal appeals court.

IN TONIGHT'S show, correspondent Dan Rather says CBS News, in its probe into the slaying of King, the black civil rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner, tried to interview Ray in prison.

"But due to the repeated advice of his lawyers, he wouldn't talk for this broadcast," he adds. "So the best witness stands mute."

Like CBS' two-part November study of President John F. Kennedy's assassination tonight's show revisits the scene of the slaying, restudies the evidence and interviews various persons, ranging from one of Ray's current lawyers to a Memphis landlady who rented Ray a room.

In the Kennedy shows, CBS cautiously concluded that while "it may never be established" whether Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, "the evidence indicates" that Oswald "probably did" shoot Kennedy.

THERE'S NONE of that in tonight's show. CBS fails to turn up any evidence of a conspiracy to kill King and doesn't offer any opinion, even a cautiously-worded one, on whom it thinks may have killed him.

It simply says, among other things, that Tennessee's case against Ray as a lone assassin "was not as air-tight as we had been told," that no one saw the fatal shot fired and that there's no evidence Ray was near the scene of King's death "at the moment of the murder."

And it reiterates that "what seemed to be unquestionable proof — an unqualified plea of guilty — now is in legal contest" and that a federal appellate court decision on Ray's case may come soon.

SO, DESPITE its work, the show winds up sounding the let's-have-an-independent-investigation call CBS News first made at the end of its November probe into the Kennedy assassination.

At that time, it said "history will be less confused" if new congressional probes are made about information CBS said was withheld from the Warren Commission by the CIA and the FBI.

Tonight, it says that regardless of the court decision Ray gets, doubts about the circumstances of King's assassination still will remain and "an outside investigation is now needed" to attempt to resolve those doubts.